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THE DEPRECIATION OF FARMING LAND.

WITHIN the last fifteen years, the market value of farming land in the Eastern and Middle States of our Union has undergone a remarkable decline. There are no available statistics wherefrom any strictly scientific estimate of the amount of this decline may be made.* The reports of tax assessors class together all land appraisals under one head, wherein the enormous appreciation of city property much more than offsets the depreciation of property devoted to agriculture alone. It appears evident, also, that the later assessment valuations of farming land are in no proportion to its actual depreciation. The forthcoming national census will probably show some measure of this depreciation, although it is exceedingly doubtful whether it does so to anything like to the full extent. Owners, particularly those wishing to sell, or whose holdings are mortgaged, always value their property above rather than at the current price. The census of 1880 shows an increase in Eastern and Middle State farm valuation over the census of 1870, estimating the latter

*The *Report of the New York State Assessors for 1887* declares that, "in the central and southern counties, comprising the greater portion of the State, lands devoted to agricultural purposes have, during the last fifteen years, depreciated in value from 10 to 20 per cent." At a late meeting of the Board of Equalization, one of the State Assessors submitted a report alleging that "in every county there has been a depreciation in values of farm property of from 15 to 30 per cent. The Massachusetts State Census for 1885, as compared with the same census for 1875, shows an increase in the value of the cultivated land of that State, which cultivated land constitutes 24 per cent. of the whole, of 4.95 per cent.; a decrease in the value of uncultivated land, which constitutes 40 per cent. of the whole, of 12.53 per cent.; and a decrease in the value of woodland, which constitutes 36 per cent. of the whole, of 14.12 per cent. Of 693 farms, at the rate of about 80 to each county, from which the Connecticut Bureau of Labor Statistics obtained valuations in the year 1887, the average value per acre was \$41.98. The average valuation per acre of the total farming land of the State of Connecticut, according to the National Census of 1880, was \$49.69.

in gold; yet, although not so marked as during the ten years now drawing to a close, there was a very considerable decline in the price of farming land within those States during the former ten years.

While, therefore, no one is in possession of sufficient data to afford mathematical proof, it is believed that those familiar with the subject will bear out the assertion that, except in the vicinity of cities and large villages, farming land in the States mentioned has depreciated during this time, on an average, fully twenty-five per cent., or one-quarter, and, when remote from transportation, or adapted only for grazing, or run down in soil or equipment, has become difficult of sale at any price. In some sections, notably in New England, this depreciation took place earlier, and everywhere had begun before the time specified; for, although it is during the last fifteen years that their effect has become generally visible, the causes leading to this depreciation have been in operation for a time more than as long again. Among these causes are commonly reckoned the competition of the West, the purchase of land during the inflation period, the high price and changed conditions of labor, the weight of taxation, the discriminations and extravagant charges of railway companies, the impoverishment of the soil, the increased expense of living, and a general disaffection towards the agricultural life. Some one or more of these causes have brought about a large increase in the number of those wishing to sell and a large diminution in the number of those wishing to buy Eastern and Middle State agricultural holdings. An inquiry into these causes is the purpose of this article.

The reason most often heard is that of Western competition. The planting of new land, assuredly, has always made less profitable the tillage of land already planted since men planted at all. So far, however, as Eastern agriculture suffers from the bringing into cultivation of

new land, it will be found that, according to the census reports, the percentage of increase in the area of farming land throughout the whole Union was greater between 1850 and 1860 than it was between 1870 and 1880, beyond which percentage it will hardly have increased between 1880 and 1890. Population increased in very nearly the same ratio during each of the foregoing decades, as did also the production of agricultural staples and the export demand therefor. The average price of farm produce in the Northern United States for the last fifteen years, save always between 1862 and 1872, is not below the average of former years. If wheat, maize, and the other cereals have ruled lower, butcher's and smoked meats, hay, and dairy products have ruled higher. Whatever advantage the Western husbandman possesses in lower-priced, more fertile, and easier tilled land is offset by the Eastern husbandman's lower rate of interest, smaller outlay for machinery, less waste, and more thorough cultivation. The average yield per acre of wheat and of maize is as great in the East as in the West; and any butcher will testify that prime Eastern fatted beef or pork is equal, if not superior, to the Western product. The great wheat-growers of Dakota and California, as well as the Territorial cattle-ranch proprietors, do, indeed, have the same advantage over the proprietors of smaller holdings that any other enterprise employing a hundred has over one employing a half-dozen hands; but they at the same time undergo greater risk, the failure of a single year often making them bankrupt. It is difficult to understand why Eastern and Middle State husbandmen at the present time have any more reason to complain of Western competition than did those in the days of their fathers and grandfathers.

Although the last property to readjust its price to a more stable medium of exchange, farming land had already undergone a very considerable decline from inflation

prices before the financial collapse of 1873. Moreover, its apparent rise in price, as well as change in ownership, during the inflation period was less than that of almost any other kind of property. While many certainly were buyers of land at a fictitious valuation, and many more the victims of ill-advised investments in other ways, it cannot be said that the agricultural class suffered more from that great calamity than any other class. Like other unfortunate ones, many of them discharged their obligations before the resumption of specie payments, through the bankruptcy court. It is also to be noted that the present average selling price of Eastern farming land is lower than its average selling price before the beginning of inflation: whereas that of town lots is, in the great cities, as high again. Some reason must be sought for the depreciation of Eastern farming land other than its purchase at a fictitious valuation.

During the lifetime of the present generation there has been throughout the industrial world a very decided advance in the price of human labor. In the United States and in Great Britain, notwithstanding the often recurrent "hard times," this advance is something more than one-quarter and something less than one-third. Moreover, there has been in our own country during this time a very great change, both in the method of remuneration and in the conditions of agricultural service. Formerly, the hired hands were in great measure paid with a part of the produce which they had helped to raise. The flour, meat, fuel, and the like, consumed by themselves and their families, made no small outlet for the products of the farm. Now the farm proprietor markets all his produce, either himself or through local agents, in the most readily accessible city; while the main supplies of his own family and of the farm laborers have been raised perhaps a thousand miles away. Agriculture, like everything else, is becoming specialized, and its proceeds marketed in bulk.

Money is the only medium of exchange, to the great increase of the trading class, whose subsistence must needs be at the expense of both producer and consumer. Furthermore, the farm proprietor boards his hands much less often than he formerly did,—a burden, however, for whose removal he can well afford to lessen, as he certainly does, the amount of his net income. The increased wages and increased independence of labor are a factor with which every other industry as well as agriculture is obliged to reckon, but the payment of wages wholly in money unquestionably does make the matter of labor a somewhat greater charge to the agricultural proprietor, as compared with other proprietors, than it was a generation ago.

It is hardly necessary to show that, since the breaking out of the Civil War, taxation has been to the American farm proprietor a largely increased burden. Nor is this at the present time by any means wholly the result of that conflict. Direct taxation is no doubt heavier in many agricultural communities by reason of war obligations yet unliquidated, but probably less on this account than on account of later obligations entered into for the assistance of railway and other enterprises which have become bankrupt. The changed conditions of manufactures and the trades, which have drawn to great centres of population industries once more evenly distributed, have thrown the burden of taxation in rural communities almost wholly upon the agricultural proprietors. The general tendency of all direct local taxation has been to increase the rates as well as to substitute a money payment in place of a quota of labor or subsistence. These, and perhaps other causes, have contributed to raise the amount of direct taxation, which always bears heavier upon agriculture than upon any other calling.

All indirect taxation inevitably enhances the price of every commodity upon which it is imposed. While, however, our so-called protective system forces us to pay

higher prices than the people of other industrial countries for certain food products and for nearly all manufactured articles, it is at the same time true that improved methods of manufacture have enabled such articles to be sold all over the world for lower prices than they were sold for a generation ago. So that, with respect to prices, the American consumer pays less for many dutiable commodities than ever before. Tariff taxation has injured him less because it might have injured him so much more. This, assuredly, is no argument in favor of tariff taxation; but people are thereby made less restive under it, and it must be taken into consideration in any comparison between present and former relative prosperity. In so far as concerns the agricultural proprietor, this remark is as applicable to what he sells as it is to what he buys. Tariff taxation has made the foreign demand for our agricultural products less than it would have been under a system of free interchange; but the constantly increasing consumption both at home and abroad has kept the average price of agricultural staples, on the whole, about where it has been, save during inflation times, for the last forty years. Tariff taxation greatly discriminates against the agricultural as compared with the manufacturing and the mining proprietor: it has likewise diminished the former's political consequence; but, as far as concerns the prices of agricultural products, its influence has been towards the reduction of his potential rather than of his actual prosperity.

There can be no doubt that in years past the advantage taken by railway companies of regions possessing no means of transportation but their own has been, both directly and indirectly, a serious drawback upon agricultural prosperity. Extravagant freight was a formidable item in the expenses of farm proprietors so situated, and made simply impossible the establishment of any manufacturing enterprise in their vicinity. Competition and

legislative intervention, however, have in great measure corrected this injustice, which in the Eastern and Middle States can now hardly be said to exist. The freight upon farm products, as upon every other kind of product, has steadily diminished in proportion to the extent of railway development.

With regard to impoverishment of the soil, and alluding again to the effect of Western competition, it is the writer's belief that the chief injury of that competition was inflicted forty years ago by the transfer to the West, not of grain-raising, an industry to which the West is peculiarly adapted, but of stock-raising, an industry especially adapted to the East. There have been three eras or stages of Eastern and Middle State agriculture: first, when the main industry was grain-raising; second, when it was stock-raising; and, third, when it was a mixture of both,—together with dairying, fruit culture, and whatever else might at the same time be carried on with profit. Grain-raising everywhere means exhaustion of the soil; mixed agriculture, properly directed, returns to the soil as much as it takes therefrom; but stock-raising is always a certain means of enriching the soil whereon it is conducted, and of no kind of stock-raising is this so true as it is of the raising of sheep. The grain-raising period of the East—that is to say, of the parts settled previous to this century—was over before the close of the century's second decade, at which time the soil was probably less productive than it has ever been since. After that began the stock-raising period, during which great attention was paid to the breeding of wool-producing sheep, that in vast flocks covered the hillsides of New England, New York, and Pennsylvania, raising in the course of twenty years the impoverished soil of the older portion of those States to a degree of fertility which it had not known since first cleared. This period began to close before 1850, the ten years subsequent to which,

all things considered, were the most evenly prosperous in the history of American agriculture. With the Civil War and inflated prices, Eastern farm proprietors began raising heavy crops of hay and grain for market, ploughing up land fit only for pasturage, and cutting grass wherever it grew, even to the mountain's edge. Under this process, much Eastern land rapidly deteriorated; and, where the process was persisted in, land has been reduced to the condition of seventy-five years ago. Such ruinous agriculture, however, could not, in general, long endure; and for the last twenty years a large proportion of Eastern farm proprietors have yearly returned to their land in the shape of extra fertilizing matter more than has been taken therefrom. Eastern farming land, while on an average less productive than it was forty, is not any less productive than it was twenty years ago.

Against whatever increased expense or disadvantage may have resulted from the foregoing causes to Eastern agriculture must be offset, in a measure, a reduction of the rate of interest, formerly six or seven, now seldom over five per cent.; also, the reduced price of all kinds of farming implements and machinery. On the whole, when the capital, industry, and managing ability have been in both times equal, it is believed that agriculture in the Eastern and Middle States has been as profitable during the last ten years as, save between 1862 and 1872, it has been for any ten years since our existence as a nation.

The causes for the depreciation of agricultural property thus far considered have been political or economical. Let us now consider the social causes. The increased cost of maintaining a family, notwithstanding the decreased cost of almost every kind of commodity, is a phase of modern life going to show that human necessity is a condition largely relative, and influenced more by the imagination than by the sense of feeling or by the organs of digestion. "Glory and curiosity," says Montaigne, "are

the scourges of the soul, of which the last prompts us to thrust our noses into everything, and the first forbids us to leave anything undecided." Distinction and sensual entertainment, in all manner of degrees, exercise in our time the minds of the many as much as in Montaigne's time glory and curiosity exercised the minds of the few. To that spirit which is always uppermost in court as well as in trading and commercial centres, the agricultural portion of the Eastern and Middle States has been for the last twenty years becoming more and more captive. We have been trying for some time to believe that occupation or calling is a matter of neither moral, political, nor economical consequences. There doubtless are cases where one's calling may not influence one either morally or politically; but, economically speaking, there go with certain callings conditions more or less fixed, which those following them must observe under peril of disaster. In no calling are these conditions more fixed than in agriculture. The income derived from successful agriculture is greatly disproportionate to the income derived from successful trade, and the money passing in the course of a year through the hands of a trader is many times more than that passing through the hands of a husbandman employing the same or even greater capital.

The man, therefore, whose revenue is obtained from agriculture cannot long imitate, in the matter of personal and family expenditure, the man whose revenue is obtained from trade, without infringing upon his capital, which usually is his land. The immense increase and at the same time reduced cost of everything designed to gratify the instincts of ornament and display, of the facilities for travel, of public diversions,—in short, of all devices for inducing people to part with money, or money's worth,—have brought to the present generation of country dwellers a temptation from which its predecessors were in great measure free. The agricultural proprietors of

the Eastern and Middle States have been undergoing for a generation the same experience that the English country gentry underwent when England first began to be a manufacturing and trading nation. So many new ways were afforded for the use of money that many of them pledged their estates to obtain a larger supply,—an operation which often resulted with them, as it has with us, in the parting with their estates altogether. This, to be sure, is very bad economy; but it is an instinct more or less innate,—one which is the least resisted by those whose store is the provision of other effort than their own. The over-indulgence of this instinct is part of the experience of every nation which has become enriched by trade or conquest or discovery. The gains and consequent extravagance of the successful adventurers excite the desire of the more conservative and home-abiding ones,—always and everywhere those belonging to the agricultural class. There is not a doubt that no small measure of Eastern and Middle State land depreciation is due to the “despotism of expense,” to an unusual number of agricultural holdings being of late years forced into the market by reason of their having been eaten up through the personal and family expenditure of their proprietors.

But to another reason, more than to all the rest put together, is due, in the opinion of the writer, this falling off in the value of Eastern farming land; namely, a disaffection on the part of a growing number of country-born Eastern men and women towards agriculture as a vocation. The slow and moderate return upon capital invested in agriculture is one cause of this disaffection. Whosoever follows any vocation solely for the amount of money it may yield can exercise his powers to that end in many other ways better than in agriculture. The Hebrew, that unerring scenter-out of gain, never is a husbandman. The homage paid to wealth in the Northern United States for the last quarter of a century has turned

into the ways most productive of gain the greater part of those young men whose career is generally determined by the common ideal. The question asked himself by the new-comer upon the scene of action is not so often, In what calling shall I obtain most health and wisdom and independence? but, What one will bring me the most money? Parents have encouraged this spirit, oftentimes involving themselves in their children's ventures, to the breaking up and sending into the market of many an old-time country home.

Another cause of disaffection towards the agricultural life is its isolation. The generally reduced size of families and the tightening of class lines have lessened social intercourse in rural communities. The church is not as formerly a common centre of attraction. The young people envy the easier intercourse of the town, think their own life dull, and want to live where it is not so lonesome. Moreover, the socialistic idea has been insensibly operating every way except politically in our country for a time longer than we are aware. The reason is obvious. The share of men in whatever becomes desirable through the labor or presence of other men increases in proportion to their interdependence. The day laborer in a great town may fare better, find better schools, and, dearest of all, behold a thousand times more of the passing show than the small agricultural proprietor in a remote country region. To be sure, he must subject himself more to the will of others, in order to obtain these supposed advantages; but a condition of subjection does not appear to oppress the spirit of the American man as it once did. If subjection but enables him, as the saying is, "to touch life upon more sides," he often prefers it to freedom, even though he knows it must remain his permanent condition. A man who had served at different times as valet, waiter, barber, usher, and what not, was heard to say that, in case of need, he would do anything except work on a farm.

He did not so much mind plain fare or the laying-to of his bones. It was the living, as he would have said, "out of the world," away from novelty and fashion and excitement,— the only world he could appreciate.

A further cause of disaffection towards the agricultural life is the growth among us of physical squeamishness and tenderness of the person,— a disposition to avoid contact with nature in the gross, with whatever is sharp or rank or rugged. Agriculture thickens the skin, broadens the hands, soils the clothes, and keeps one from looking genteel, or, as Sterne says, "the appearing to be somebody in order to be so." Whatever of this spirit exists in American life should not come to it through the Anglo-Saxon, who anciently took to the land as naturally as the Northman took to the sea. The young German or Southern European of gentle birth, seeking his living among us, will enlist in the army, or even betake him to a beer-cellar, if he find no way to utilize his accomplishments; but the young Englishman of like condition, when stranded here, goes straight to agriculture or to pastoral life in the South or West, as did his kinsmen two centuries ago upon the Atlantic Coast. It is probable that more young Eastern and Middle State countrymen to-day would rather hire themselves out to stand behind counters, or to sit in boxes selling tickets, than to become foremen to farm proprietors at the same remuneration, or even to become small farm proprietors on their own account. This is not from an aversion to physical exercise. These very merchandise and ticket salesmen are, most likely, members of boat-clubs and gymnasiums. It is largely because of the more polished appearance which they are enabled to affect, and a readiness to endure those things which offend man's spirit rather than those things which offend his body.

Still another cause for the disaffection towards agriculture as a vocation is the decreased importance of the agri-

cultural proprietor, socially and politically, as compared with the members of other callings. His local influence is less than that of the trader or manufacturer or contractor, or whomsoever else is the largest dispenser of credit or employer of labor in his neighborhood. He who in number and the proportion of his taxes is first is, for all purposes of official distinction, considered the least. Politically, the farm proprietor cannot "put up" enough, nor is he a reliable or active enough advocate of special interests to constitute him a legislator or administrator. He may, indeed, still aspire to the offices of selectman and supervisor; but the State and national politics of the East have been dominated for years by the cities and manufacturing centres. There remained to him for a while as fields wherein he might win a little public consideration the agricultural society and the church, of which the former, his own especial institution, now bestows its chief honors upon rich fanciers, professional horse-racers, and base ball clubs; while the latter has no longer any honors, regarded as such by the whole community, to bestow. All roads towards distinction lead away from the farm. Aware of his diminished consequence in the world of politics and affairs, the farm proprietor emulous of distinction, if unable to forsake it himself, desires that his sons shall follow almost any other calling than his own. The older States contain at the present time a larger number than ever before of agricultural proprietors discontented with their calling, because it appears to be every year consigning them more and more to lives of meanness and obscurity.

There are sundry other causes growing out of the changed conditions of American society, which have helped to produce a disaffection towards the agricultural life. One more only will be here considered,—the influence of foreign immigration. Forty years ago, the inhabitants of the northern part of the American Union were a

homogeneous people. Two centuries had fused together the various races from whence they sprung into a population having very much the same moral, social, and religious sympathies. Since that time, the settlement among us of great numbers of immigrants, born and, for the most part, reared under institutions and habits of life wholly unlike our own, has made the present generation of Americans dwelling in the Northern States a composite people, the diverse elements of which time only can socially unite. It is useless to descant upon the unreasonable and unjust prejudice of race. From the beginning of history, the disparagement and too often hatred of one another by different races of men has been a fruitful source of human discord. This antipathy, though softened from the furious hate of barbarous times, none the less exists in our country to-day. City life, because class lines therein always are sharper drawn, socially speaking, is not so much affected by the presence of the immigrant population as is the country life. The relation between employer and employed is wholly different. Before the immigration period, the mass of Northern agricultural proprietors wrought by the side of their hired hands, and invited them to seats at their tables, with never a desire on their part that it should be otherwise. When the immigrant began to supplant the native hired hand, the working farm proprietor treated him as he had always treated the hired hand of his own race, not, however, from choice, but from duty, as an upholder of the creed of human equality. To this overcoming of prejudice, and of what was oftentimes repugnance arising from other sources than prejudice, the new generation was less equal than the old. The younger ones did, indeed, hold their peace; but the process of assimilating into our social body such a mass of crude human material was to the more educated portion of young Northern country people a sore infliction, and certainly has had no inconsiderable

place among the causes which have made so many of them abandon the country life.

As an offset to these various real and supposed disadvantages which of late years have so reduced the proportionate number of our agricultural population, there is — what? There is this,—a preserved individuality. The agricultural proprietor of to-day may pursue his calling with as little subservience to the whims or passions of others as did his grandfather in the same vocation; but every man who to-day earns a subsistence outside of agriculture must surrender more of his personality—that is to say, of his independence—than ever before since the foundation of the republic. There are, indeed, a greater number among us of those to whom the surrender of their individuality is no pain, and the air is filled with the schemes of such as would destroy individuality altogether. To these may well be repeated the words lately uttered by one of the foremost and most fearless of living American thinkers: “Men have failed of freedom, not because kings, nobles, and priests enslaved them, but because liberty was too high and great for them.”

It is not to be supposed that this disaffection towards the agricultural life is unanimous, or even generally the rule, throughout the Eastern and Middle United States. Notwithstanding the combined social and economical causes which have thus lowered the popular estimate of their calling and the money value of their holdings, there are dwelling all over that historic portion of our country extending from the St. Lawrence to the Potomac a goodly array of agricultural proprietors, whose acres are not in the market, and who have no desire to exchange their calling for any other one. These men are not millionnaires, nor “captains of industry,” nor political magnates, nor leaders of fashion, nor manufacturers of public opinion; but they unite in themselves, as a class, more honesty and independence, more mental and physi-

cal health, more symmetry of character and capacity for separate kinds of employment, than any other order of American men. It is to them, in times of real emergency, that the inhabitants of the rural regions always turn; and it is a great misfortune that in all times they are not preferred for the business of legislation and administration instead of the mob of lawyers, speculators, and professional demagogues to which the business of government is so often intrusted. They do not fill the place in affairs which they filled fifty years ago,—that place is now filled by the organizers and employers of associated capital; but they are masters of life, as far as life may be mastered, as the best types of their class ever have been since civilization began.

ALFRED H. PETERS.